

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
March 25, 2004

HUNTINGTON BEACH WETLANDS RESTORATION PLAN

File No. 04-008
Project Manager: Trish Chapman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy to prepare a restoration plan for the Huntington Beach Wetlands.

LOCATION: Huntington Beach Wetlands, City of Huntington Beach, County of Orange

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy (HBWC) to prepare a conceptual restoration plan for the Huntington Beach wetlands ecosystem from Beach Boulevard to the Santa Ana River, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, HBWC shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget, schedule and the names and qualifications of any contractors or subcontractors to be employed for these tasks.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 6 of the Public Resources Code (31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.

3. The Huntington Beach wetlands have been identified in the City of Huntington Beach's Local Coastal Plan as an environmentally sensitive habitat area which should be preserved and restored.
 4. The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code."
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project would provide a grant to the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy (HBWC) to prepare a conceptual restoration plan for the Huntington Beach wetlands ecosystem from Beach Boulevard to the Santa Ana River (Exhibit 1). The proposed project has been identified as a Tier 2 priority by the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.

The Huntington Beach wetlands comprises approximately 180 acres of restored and degraded salt marsh, seasonal wetlands, and coastal dune habitat. Talbert Marsh, a 25-acre marsh at the south end of the wetlands complex, was successfully restored in 1989; however, habitat quality has declined in recent years due to sedimentation of tidal channels. The remaining 155 acres have not been restored and are dominated by degraded, non-tidal pickleweed habitat. Over the past two years, the Coastal Conservancy and HBWC have partnered to acquire 65 acres of the Huntington Beach Wetlands, and are working to acquire an additional 17 acres. In addition, CalTrans and the City of Huntington Beach are negotiating to acquire up to 60 additional acres of the wetlands complex. Having acquired a significant portion of the wetlands area, HBWC is ready to develop a restoration plan for the larger wetlands complex.

The purpose of the Huntington Beach Wetlands Restoration Plan (HBWRP) is to evaluate the engineering, ecological, and economic feasibility of wetlands restoration alternatives within the Huntington Beach Wetlands, and then develop a framework for a coordinated restoration program. The study will characterize the existing conditions; identify potential restoration alternatives based on the opportunities and constraints; and then identify preferred alternatives for further planning. Critical issues that the study will address include:

- Options for enhancing tidal circulation to Talbert Marsh and restoring tidal circulation to the other basins to the maximum extent feasible, while also protecting existing habitat for the Belding's savannah sparrow, a state endangered species.
- Modeling the hydraulic and hydrologic conditions within the wetlands to develop alternatives that will maximize habitat benefits while minimizing long-term maintenance requirements.
- Outlining a restoration program that can be implemented in phases, with the understanding that some phases may never be implemented if privately-owned properties can not be acquired. It is anticipated that different phases of the program will be implemented by different agencies. For instance, one portion may be implemented by CalTrans for mitigation credit, while the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers may take the lead on another phase under its Ecological Restoration program.

Development of the HBWRP will be overseen by a study management committee that includes HBWC, the Conservancy, City, County of Orange, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Army Corps of Engineers, CalTrans, and the University of California.

HBWC was formed with the express purpose to acquire, restore and ultimately manage the Huntington Beach wetlands. HBWC has over 15 years of experience in restoration and management of the wetlands. HBWC successfully completed the restoration of Talbert Marsh in 1989 and has continued to manage the marsh. HBWC also conceived and constructed a wildlife care facility adjacent to the wetlands.

Site Description: The Huntington Beach wetlands are a remnant of an historical wetlands complex that covered approximately 2,900 acres. This wetlands complex was formed by the migration of the lower Santa Ana River over the coastal plain. Over the past century, the wetlands were filled, and used for oil exploration, energy production, landfills, and urban development. Channelization of the Santa Ana River, local flood channels, and construction of Pacific Coast Highway have cut off tidal action to most of the wetlands. Today, only about 350 acres of the historic wetlands remain, divided between the Huntington Beach wetlands and the Santa Ana River mouth wetlands.

The Huntington Beach wetlands are divided into several distinct sections, separated by roadways and other infrastructure. Most of the wetlands are isolated from tidal circulation by the Talbert Flood Control Channel. In 1989, tidal circulation was re-introduced to Talbert Marsh and a mix of subtidal and intertidal habitats were restored. Over the past 15 years, sand and sediment accumulation within the marsh has lowered the quantity and quality of subtidal habitat. Several adaptive management measures have been suggested to address this issue, and these will be evaluated in the study.

A multi-agency partnership worked with HBWC to restore Talbert Marsh, a 25-acre portion of the wetlands complex. While overall this restoration has been a success, changes over time require follow-up enhancement activities to maximize habitat benefits. The unrestored areas of the Huntington Beach wetlands primarily support non-tidal salt marsh vegetation that varies greatly in quality.

Project History: The Coastal Conservancy has been working for almost 20 years on the acquisition and restoration of the Huntington Beach wetlands. In the late 1980s, the Conservancy helped form HBWC and then provided funding for HBWC to acquire and restore the Talbert Marsh. This project involved removing the western wall of the Talbert Flood Control channel to re-introduce tidal circulation to the marsh. For the next ten years, HBWC and the Conservancy tried unsuccessfully to acquire additional portions of the wetlands. In December 2001, HBWC acquired 17 acres of the wetlands from Southern California Edison with the help of a \$675,000 grant from the Conservancy. In June 2003, HBWC acquired an additional 45 acres (the Piccirelli Property) with a grant of \$1,180,000 from the Conservancy.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$300,000
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Coastal Program)	50,000
City of Huntington Beach (in-kind)	<u>40,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$390,000

The intended source of Conservancy funds is monies appropriated to the Conservancy from Proposition 40, the "California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002." Allowable uses under this legislation include acquisition, restoration,

and protection of land and water resources in accordance with the Conservancy's enabling legislation. The proposed project will facilitate the restoration and enhancement of up to 180 acres of coastal salt marsh and seasonal wetlands habitat and is therefore consistent with the allowable uses of the Proposition 40 monies.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resource Code Sections 31251-31270. Pursuant to §31251, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to enhance coastal resources that have suffered a loss of natural and scenic values as a result of natural or human-induced events. The HBWRP will identify corrective measures to facilitate the restoration and enhancement of up to 180 acres of coastal salt marsh and seasonal wetlands habitat.

Pursuant to §31252, the Huntington Beach wetlands area is identified in the City of Huntington Beach Local Coastal Program as requiring public action to resolve resource protection problems, as described in the "Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies" section below.

Consistent with §31253, the amount of funding recommended for the proposed project is based on the total amount of funding available for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant and its project partners, and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible coastal resource enhancement projects. The Conservancy is authorized in §31257 to fund up to \$300,000 of the cost of preparing coastal resource enhancement plans.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project will increase Coastal Resource Conservation by facilitating the restoration and enhancement of up to 180 acres of coastal wetlands habitat and will further the goals of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective C**, the proposed project will remove invasive wetlands species and replace them with native vegetation.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** This project has strong support from both the City of Huntington Beach and Orange County. The project also has the support of resource agencies including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, and U.S. Army Corps

of Engineers. The project has been identified as a priority by the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. Support letters are provided in Exhibit 2.

4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the City of Huntington Beach.
5. **Need:** Neither HBWC, the City, nor the County have sufficient funds to undertake this project without the support of the Conservancy. Without Conservancy participation, this project would not occur.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Over 75 percent of coastal salt marsh has been lost in southern California. Only small remnants remain of the large wetlands complexes that historically lined the region's coast. All of the remaining coastal wetlands provide critical habitat for fish and wildlife, including several threatened and endangered species and migratory birds using the Pacific Flyway. Restoration of the Huntington Beach wetlands provides a significant opportunity to improve the region's coastal salt marsh habitat.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Readiness:** The grantee has developed a scope of work and identified a consultant to prepare the restoration plan. The project is ready to begin as soon as the funding has been secured.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the "Project History" section above.
15. **Cooperation:** Development of the HBWRP will be overseen by a multi-agency team including HBWC, the Conservancy, City, County, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Army Corps of Engineers, CalTrans, and the University of California.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Huntington Beach wetlands has been identified as an environmentally sensitive habitat area in the City of Huntington Beach Local Coastal Program (LCP). The proposed project is consistent with LCP Policy 10 which calls for the City to "promote the improvement of the biological productivity and appearance of wetland habitats." The policy includes promoting the reestablishment of tidal flushing (P.10a) and promoting the participation of a multi-agency partnership in the restoration and management of the wetlands (P.10b).

The proposed project area has also been designated as a Coastal Conservation District in the LCP. The purpose of this designation is to provide for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of wetlands and environmentally sensitive habitat areas located within the Coastal Zone. The proposed project is consistent with the LCP because it will 1) facilitate restoration of the Huntington Beach wetlands; 2) evaluate opportunities for re-establishing tidal flushing to portions of the marsh; and 3) be directed by a multi-agency partnership.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262. Consistent with §15262, the project will only involve preparation of planning documents and will consider environmental factors. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.